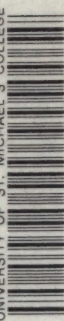


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CONGREGATION
OF THE
RAMENTS

Rev. Joseph Dreyler.

**Decree on First Holy Communion
for Children**

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S. CONGREGATION OF THE SACRAMENTS.

DECREE ON THE AGE OF THOSE TO BE ADMITTED TO FIRST HOLY COMMUNION.

THE pages of the Gospels plainly testify to the special love which Christ showed whilst on earth to the little ones. It was His delight to be in their midst: He laid His hands upon them; He embraced and blessed them; He was indignant when they were repulsed by His disciples, and He reprimanded the latter in the following words: "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God."¹ How highly He prizes their innocence and simplicity of soul He shows when, calling a little one, He said to His disciples: "Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven. And he that shall receive one such little child in My name, receiveth Me."²

Bearing this in mind, the Catholic Church from the beginning took care to bring Christ to the little ones through Eucharistic Communion, which was given even to the sucklings. This, as was prescribed in almost all the ancient rituals till the thirteenth century, was done at baptism, and the same custom prevailed for a long time in some places. It is still in vogue with the Greeks and Orientals. But to avoid all danger, lest the children should spit out the consecrated host, the custom obtained from the beginning of giving the Holy Eucharist under the species of wine alone.

The infants did not, however, receive Holy Communion only at Baptism, for they frequently afterwards partook of the

¹ Mark 10: 13-16.

² Math. 18: 3, 4, 5.

divine repast. It was then the custom in many churches to give Communion to the children immediately after the clergy; in others, to dispense to them the small fragments left over after the Communion of the adults.

Later on, this custom became obsolete in the Latin Church. Neither were children permitted to approach the holy table before the dawn of the use of reason and before having some knowledge of the august Sacrament. This new discipline, already accepted by several particular councils, was solemnly confirmed in the Fourth Lateran Œcumenical Council by promulgating the celebrated Canon XXI, in which the reception of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion is prescribed to all the faithful who have arrived at the use of reason, in the following words: "All the faithful of both sexes, after coming to the use of reason, shall confess all their sins alone to their proper priest at least once a year, strive to fulfil the enjoined penance as far as possible, devoutly receiving Holy Communion at least at Easter time, unless by the advice of the priest and for some reasonable cause they should deem it well to abstain for a while."

The Council of Trent in no way disapproving of the ancient discipline of giving Holy Communion to children before they have attained the use of reason, confirmed the decree of the Lateran Council and pronounced anathema on those who hold a contrary opinion: ³ "If any one shall deny that all the faithful of both sexes who have attained the use of reason are obliged to receive Communion every year, at least at Easter time, according to the precepts of holy mother Church, let him be anathema."

Therefore in virtue of the aforesaid decree of the Lateran Council still in force, the faithful as soon as they arrive at the years of discretion are obliged to receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion at least once a year.

But in determining the year when children come to the use of reason many errors and deplorable abuses have crept in in the course of time. There were those who considered one age necessary for the sacrament of Penance and another for Holy Eucharist. For the sacrament of Penance they judged that

³ Sess. XXI de Communionem, c. 4; Sess. XIII de Eucharistia, c. 3, can. 9.

age necessary in which one can distinguish right from wrong, hence can commit sin; for Holy Eucharist, however, they required a greater age in which a deeper knowledge of matters of faith and a better preparation of the soul can be had. And thus, according to the various customs of places and opinions of men, the age of ten years was fixed for receiving First Holy Communion in some places; in others fourteen years and even more were required, in the meanwhile it being forbidden for all those children under the required age to receive Holy Communion.

This custom by which, under the plea of safeguarding the august Sacrament, the faithful were kept away from the same, was the cause of many evils. It happened that the innocence of childhood, torn away from the embraces of Christ, was deprived of the sap of interior life; from which it also followed that youth destitute of this strong help, surrounded by so many snares, having lost its candor, fell into vice before ever tasting of the sacred mysteries. Even though a more thorough preparation and an accurate sacramental confession should precede First Holy Communion, which does not happen everywhere, yet the loss of first innocence is always to be deplored and might have been avoided by receiving the Holy Eucharist in more tender years.

Not less to be condemned is that custom, which exists in many places, whereby children are not allowed to receive the Sacrament of Penance before they are admitted to Communion; or else absolution is not given to them. Thus it happens that, burdened perhaps with mortal sins, they remain a long time in great danger.

But the worst of all is that, in some places, children not yet admitted to First Holy Communion are not permitted to receive the Sacred Viaticum, even when in danger of death; and thus, dying and being buried as infants, they are not helped by the prayers of the Church.

Such injury is caused by those who insist on an extraordinary preparation for First Holy Communion, more than is reasonable, not realizing that this kind of precaution proceeds from the errors of the Jansenists, who maintain that Holy Eucharist is a reward, not a remedy for human frailty. The Council of Trent holds a different opinion when it teaches

that it is "an antidote by which we are freed from daily faults and preserved from mortal sins."⁴ This doctrine has lately been inculcated by a decree given on 26 December, 1905, in which daily approach to Communion is opened to all, both old and young—two conditions only being required, the state of grace and a right intention. Neither does it appear reasonable that, whilst formerly even sucklings received the remnant of the sacred particles, at present an extraordinary preparation should be required from the children who are in the happy state of innocence and candor, and greatly need this heavenly food on account of the many temptations and dangers of our times.

The abuses we condemn may be traced to the fact that those who demand a certain age for Penance and another for Holy Eucharist have neither wisely nor rightly defined the required age. The Lateran Council requires one and the same age for both sacraments, since it imposes a joint obligation of Penance and Communion. Therefore, since the age of discretion required for Penance is that at which right can be distinguished from wrong, namely when one comes to the use of reason; so also for Communion that age is required which can distinguish the Eucharistic bread from the common; which age indeed is that at which a child attains the use of reason.

Nor did the principal interpreters of the Lateran Council and those who lived at that time think otherwise. From the history of the Church it is evident that many synods and episcopal decrees, beginning with the twelfth century, shortly after the Lateran Council, admitted children of seven years of age to Holy Communion. There is moreover a testimony of the greatest authority, St. Thomas Aquinas, which reads: "When children begin to have some use of reason, so that they can conceive some devotion toward the sacrament (Eucharist), then this sacrament can be given to them." The same is explained by Ledesma as follows: "I say, with the consent of all, that Holy Eucharist should be given to all having the use of reason, no matter how soon they may acquire the same; even though the child should have but a confused idea of what it is doing." Vasquez explains the same passage in the following

⁴ Sess. XIII de Eucharistia, c. 2.

words: "As soon as a child attains the use of reason, it is obliged by divine law, so that not even the Church can dispense it from the same." The same is taught by St. Antoninus, who says: "But when a child is capable of doing wrong, that is, of committing mortal sin, then he is subject to the precept of confession and consequently Communion."⁵ The Council of Trent also forces us to the same conclusion; for whilst it declares that "infants, lacking the use of reason, are not obliged to receive Holy Communion", it assigns as the only reason, because they cannot commit sin: "since," it says, "at that age they cannot lose the acquired grace of the children of God." From this it is evident that the Council believed that children are obliged to receive Communion as soon as they can lose grace by sin. The words of the Roman Council, held under Benedict XIII, agree with this, for they hold that the obligation of receiving the Holy Eucharist begins "after the boys and girls have come to the use of reason, to that age, namely, in which they are capable of distinguishing this sacramental food, which is no other than the true body of Jesus Christ, from common and profane bread, and know how to approach the same with the proper devotion and religion."⁷ The Roman Catechism, however, says: "At what age Holy Communion should be given to children, no one can judge better than the father or the priest to whom they confess their sins. For theirs is the duty to find out and to inquire of the children whether they have acquired some knowledge of this admirable Sacrament and a taste for the same."⁸

From all this it follows that the age of discretion required for Holy Communion is that at which the child can distinguish the Eucharistic from common and material bread and knows how to approach the altar with proper devotion.

A perfect knowledge of the articles of faith is, therefore, not necessary. A few elements alone are sufficient. Nor is the full use of reason required, since the beginning of the use

⁵ P. III, tit. XIV, c. 2, p. 5.

⁶ Sess. XXI, c. 4.

⁷ Istruzione per quei che debbono la prima volta ammettersi alla S. Comunione, Append. XXX, P. II.

⁸ P. II, De Sacr. Euchar., n. 63.

of reason, that is some kind of use of reason, suffices. Wherefore to put off Communion any longer or to exact a riper age for the reception of the same is a custom that is to be rejected absolutely and the same has been repeatedly condemned by the Holy See. Thus Pius IX, of happy memory, in the letters of Cardinal Antonelli to the Bishops of France given 12 March, 1866, severely condemned the growing custom existing in some dioceses of putting off Holy Communion to a maturer age, and rejected the number of years as fixed by them.

The S. Congregation of the Council on 15 March, 1851, corrected a chapter of the Provincial Council of Rouen in which children under twelve years of age were forbidden to receive Holy Communion. This same Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, acting in a similar manner in a case proposed to it from Strassburg on 25 March, 1910, in which it was asked whether children of twelve or fourteen years could be admitted to Holy Communion, answered: "Boys and girls are to be admitted to Holy Communion when they arrive at the age of discretion or attain the use of reason."

After seriously considering all these things, the S. Congregation of the Discipline of the Sacraments, at a general meeting held 15 July, 1910, in order that the above-mentioned abuses might be removed and the children of tender years become attached to Jesus, live His life, and obtain assistance against the dangers of corruption, has judged it opportune to lay down the following norm for admitting children to First Holy Communion to be observed everywhere:

1. The age of discretion required both for Confession and Communion is the time when the child begins to reason, that is about the seventh year, more or less. From this time on the obligation of satisfying the precept of both Confession and Communion begins.

2. Both for First Confession and First Communion a complete and perfect knowledge of Christian Doctrine is not necessary. The child will, however, be obliged to learn gradually the whole catechism according to its ability.

3. The knowledge of Christian Doctrine required in children in order to be properly prepared for First Holy Communion is that they understand according to their capacity those mysteries of Faith which are necessary as a means of

salvation, that they be able to distinguish the Eucharist from common and material bread, and also approach the sacred table with the devotion becoming their age.

4. The obligation of the precept of Confession and Communion which rests upon the child, falls back principally upon those in whose care they are, that is, parents, confessors, teachers, and their pastor. It belongs to the father, however, or to the person taking his place, as also to the confessor, as the Roman Catechism declares, to admit the child to First Holy Communion.

5. The pastor shall take care to announce and distribute general Communion once or several times a year to the children, and on these occasions they shall admit not only First Communicants but also others who, with the consent of their parents and the confessor, have been admitted to the sacred table before. For both classes several days of instruction and preparation shall precede.

6. Those who have the care of children should use all diligence so that after First Communion the children shall often approach the holy table, even daily, if possible, as Jesus Christ and mother Church desire, and that they do it with a devotion becoming their age. They should bear in mind their most important duty, by which they are obliged to have the children present at the public instructions in catechism; otherwise they must supply this religious instruction in some other way.

7. The custom of not admitting children to confession, or of not absolving them, is absolutely condemned. Wherefore the Ordinaries of places, using those means which the law gives them, shall see that it is done away with.

8. It is a most intolerable abuse not to administer Viaticum and Extreme Unction to children who have attained the use of reason, and to bury them according to the manner of infants. The Ordinaries of places shall proceed severely against those who do not abandon this custom.

These resolutions of the Eminent Fathers, the Cardinals of this S. Congregation, have been approved by our most holy lord, Pope Pius X, in an audience given on the seventh day of the current month, and he has commanded the present decree to be published and promulgated. He has commanded

all the Ordinaries that the present decree shall be made known not only to the pastors and the clergy, but also to the people; to whom it shall be read yearly at Easter time in the vernacular.

The Ordinaries themselves will be obliged at the end of every five years to give an account of the observance of this decree to the Holy See, together with the other affairs of their dioceses.

Everything else to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given in Rome at the residence of the same S. Congregation on the eighth day of August, 1910.

D. Card. FERRATA, *Prefect.*

PH. GIUSTINI, *Secretary.*

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